

Shannon Drake

Senior Distinction Paper Final

April 27, 2015

Uncovering the *Wreckage*

In the OSU Department of Dance's Spring Concert on March 26, 2015, I premiered a nine minute work entitled *Wreckage* as part of my senior project. Featuring seven dancers, Maddie Leonard-Rose, Abby Carlozzo, Lily Kane, Serena Chang, Mel Mark, Rachel Merry, and Maddie Tiberi, the work ran for four shows with sound and costumes by me and lighting by Dave Covey. The end of the piece's run marked an end to a larger experience of being an OSU dance student that naturally precipitated introspection and reflection about myself and my work. I reaffirmed my belief that the making of a dance opens an opportunity to create a new world with its own beliefs, values, restrictions, norms, and rights made up of engaged participants responsive to a system of collective action. In this way, I am empowered to model a utopian society each time I make a dance through how I interact with collaborators, craft their experience with me and each other, and reveal that to the audience.

I initially focused my attention on the ideas, traces, and material that emerged during process, allowing the dance to come into being through a collaborative and improvisational creation process. Beyond that, I have begun to uncover what surfaced from this emergent process, where ideas originated, and what values underlie the world that was built in *Wreckage*. This process of looking back reveals how ideals of democracy and the underpinnings of my education relate to my creative processes, and how those values are inextricably connected to the improvisational and choreographic methods that I invoked.

As I began my process, I laid out my intentions for the project in my first email to the dancers: make a dance based on improvisation and process with attention to what emerges in making and collaborating with an inclusion of text and language as departure points. My collaborators were people interested in improvisation, composition, and performance who were not only willing to participate but also help drive the unknown journey into emergent dance-making. They were tasked with the majority of the movement making based on a few generative exercises I learned or developed over the past four years. As the dance was largely made up of movement from their bodies, I wanted them to feel ownership and agency in what was being made with it. Professor Bebe Miller, my main advisor, supported my desire to have every participant engaged and valued in the process as a primary goal, but reminded me that it was *my* work—I had the final say in what this dance would become. Professor Miller instrumentally emboldened me to “be not afraid of form” when circles, diagonals, or lines had a place in space, despite my hesitancy to give into these recognizable configurations. She articulated that this group of individual’s strong connection was being continuously tested by different circumstances. There are strategies that arose to enact different ways of being together like this that are grounded in values implicit to choreographic thinking, democracy, and improvisation. Underlying all of these values is the idea that I am the product of my education, culture, and moment in history, and as an artist, I have the ability to use that for my own modes of change, questioning, and experience.

A few threads emerged early in the process and persisted through making: text as source, words as manipulator, distilling or boiling down to ‘essentials’, space/landscape of movement, collaboration, possibility, and intuition. Later, as the piece developed, an underlying theme prevailed surrounding the idea of how ‘worlds’ collide and coexist. But before I consciously

knew those threads and theme, the mode of making was guided by small, spontaneous decisions in each rehearsal that culminated in a sense of something being created. By following an improvisational way of making with attention to intuition, impulse, attention, and curiosity, I utilized what Susan Rethorst calls “choreographic thinking”, or thinking done in action through making a dance.

In *A Choreographic Mind: Autobodygraphical Writings*, Rethorst shares her way of making that she teaches and practices. Rethorst goes into rehearsals with no plan, only attention, presence, and curiosity at what can occur. She allows decisions to arrive through impulse and play with trust in “immediacy and physicality”. In this passage, she describes how the effect of these choreographic methods serves to give her work multi-layered dimensions both conscious and unconscious to her:

Arrival rests on the idea that the dances premise and content will be made manifest through the making, that I will arrive at where I want to go, as what I want to be doing with this dance by following the dances lead. It rests on the belief that the ideas that are in me inform what I do and make, even as I am unaware of how that is operating. How what lies under my conscious decisions is leading the decisions. But also that working in such a way will add layers to those issues and that content, i.e., the dance will engender knowledge— that my dances are smarter than I am. (67)

I vested my trust in a process similar to Susan Rethorst’s, believing that the content of the work would manifest from the act of making the dance and that larger ideas I had or believed would surface as well. An example of how this materialized in my process was when I asked everyone to bring in a book for the third rehearsal from which we then randomly picked a page and line.

The most complete sentence on that line was the source text for a movement phrase.

Interestingly, as we offered interpretations, we accurately perceived the essence or story of each text that was contained in the phrases despite not knowing the sentences beforehand. The text emerged in the movement regardless of how the dancer chose to interpret, abstract, or represent their sentence. As the viewer, the content arose without it being given to me because it was embedded in the dance. The values that supported my process are traceable on a macro and micro level, from specific images for a movement to particular ideas from teachers or larger cultural systems, i.e. democracy. Life makes it into the work, whether you know it or not, because “you are already unavoidably in the soup because you are the soup—the soup of self” (Rethorst 104). It is there with your body, with yourself, with the room, with your history, all in one at once.

Effective collaboration is necessary in life and arose as an important principle while making. In my time as a performer and collaborator in other people’s projects at OSU, one particular experience modelled an ideal of collaboration that I have maintained as reference, namely Ani Javian’s MFA project process of *Elsewhere*. It is no coincidence that this project occurred simultaneously with my own. In Javian’s process, beginning the Fall semester of 2014, I felt valued for my movement and choreographic skills as well as my performance abilities. Javian trusted us emphatically, and we her. She created an atmosphere for rich exploration and curiosity but with a clear drive and articulation around what interested her. We all trusted the product and enjoyed the process towards it. I have seldom felt that fulfilled from a process as a collaborator. With Javian’s way of working occurring during my process, I was experiencing an ideal process from the perspective of a dancer that I could take into how I shaped the experience for the dancers in my own process.

In her book on making art in a post 9-11 world, theater director/choreographer Anne Bogart shares, “As a director, it is my responsibility to determine the politics and values in the room. I can insist upon justness, mutual respect, and listening. I can create a nonhierarchical environment in which creation is a collective act.” (49) The director crafts the environment for making through attention to the ideas available in the room and how to support, invite, and respect them most effectively. This attention creates a space for rich collaboration where ownership is equally shared among participants. For example, as the idea of characters came up for each dancer in process, I entrusted responsibility in the performer to know their own intentions in their bodies and in space as that character. Strategies for interaction developed to build an environment that facilitated this process of owning their character at their own pace with clarifications and complications introduced by me as needed.

I was conscious of this responsibility towards representing values in the creation process that Bogart offers, not just from Javian’s model, but also from connections to prior teachers, Abby Zbikowski and Harmony Bench. Zbikowski taught a composition class my junior year grounded in functional and responsible ideas surrounding identity issues. In a particularly resonate exercise, she had us model our idea of a utopian society through process. My understanding of this concept rose to consciousness in this process in how I chose to collaborate. Through exploring ways of being together, the group could experience ideals and practices of citizenship based on democratic modes of responsibility and collective experience. Harmony Bench asked of her improvisation class last fall, “How do we be together?” “ By exploring how to be with, here, and together through practices of freedom, relationality, sensation, recognition, responsibility, and productive non-coherence, this idea of society building gained increased dimensions of possibility.

My utopian society is built on democratic ideals. Democracy is a political governmental system that gives citizens an equal say in decisions that affect their lives through equal opportunity for participation inside social, cultural, and economic conditions that empower the practice of self-determination (Feck 4). It is the idea that a strong democracy thrives on collective consensus, belief in the equality of human beings, the possibility of peaceful co-existence, and participation of engaged, educated individuals (Feck 5). My understanding of how I utilized democracy has more to do with a way of thinking rather than an existing political structure, like monarchical democracy or direct democracy. An early 20th century philosopher and education reform activist, John Dewey, thought of democracy as a way of life dependent on cooperative experience and faith in humanity. In a lecture, *Creative Democracy: The Task Before Us*, delivered in 1939, he further articulates how democracy is experience:

Democracy as compared with other ways of life is the sole way of living which believes wholeheartedly in the process of experience as end and as means; as that which is capable of generating the science which is the sole dependable authority for the direction of further experience and which releases emotions, needs and desires so as to call into being the things that have not existed in the past. [...] The task of this release and enrichment is one that has to be carried on day by day. Since it is one that can have no end till experience itself comes to an end, the task of democracy is forever that of creation of a freer and more humane experience in which all share and to which all contribute. (4)

An effective democracy requires active participation and daily engagement with responsive attention through doing. Democracy as experience denotes continual a commitment to action and a means towards collective discoveries.

In a similar way, most likely grounded in this democratic ideology, Dewey also claims art as experience— experience being something that personally affects life and art being the development of an experience. He explains further in the book, *Art as Experience*, that “the real work of art is the building up of an integral experience out of the interaction of organic and environmental conditions and energies” (67) Dances are the crossroads between personal and political life, or “organic and environmental conditions”, as a place where political structures, like democracy, can be put into practice with a group of people. These ideals underline dance making modalities of the 60s, particularly the idea of the personal as political. The Ohio State University Department of Dance curriculum emphasizes artists of the postmodern movement from this time, such as Yvonne Rainer, Merce Cunningham, and Steve Paxton, and their questions in ways that reinforce some of these democratic ideals. Makers of this period challenged all notions of previous dance norms while also questioning the social, political, and economic institutions structuring society at large. For instance, Contact Improvisation, a form initiated by Steve Paxton that facilitates two or more people dancing while staying in contact can be seen as:

... a metaphor for democratic action, for embracing spontaneity, for thinking on one's feet (or shoulders or heads), for the rejection of hierarchy, for fostering mutual respect, for establishing an environment of risk-taking with support, and for practicing the charge to listen to one's inner voice while attending to the needs of the other. (Feck 12-13)

Contact improvisation embodies a set of political and cultural beliefs from a specific time and place, the 1960s and 1970s, which represents an ideologically grounded way to practice togetherness while maintaining a clear sense of self. As I have practiced and studied this form, these ideas understandably arose in my choreographic experience.

On multiple occasions during conversations with Miller, democracy came up as a recurring idea that manifested in different ways in my process. It evolved as a choreographic structure in the dance in how everyone cumulatively joins a state or score until everyone felt it and experienced it together. Democracy also arose as a group practice, first through a collection of movement bank material, which gave them an opportunity to teach and embody each other, and second through an improvisational practice that began each rehearsal. This improvisational practice particularly facilitated a space to explore the individual worlds that were forming for each at the time while maintaining connection and fluidity with the rest of the group. How could they be fully invested in their sense of space and landscape but with openness to how that space could change from other's actions? A structure of responsiveness and cooperative attention formed that enabled collective problem solving in real time.

The utility of improvisation in all of these structures seems fundamental. Improvisation exemplifies the responsive nature of an effective democratic system, particularly in the collaborative nature of group improvisations. The cultural implications of improvisation relate to community building largely for its collaborative possibilities, as further articulated by Cynthia Novack in her book *Sharing the Dance* when she claims that “the collaborative element of improvisation can be seen to represent a joining of the values of individualism and egalitarianism, for the realization of the individual is placed within the context of cooperation and group activity...” (190). A dance comes out of a community that is inside of a societal system built on national, social, political, economic, and cultural ideals. My experiences with contact improvisation, improvisation, and composition have come to play a huge role in how I understand making, doing, and being. These forms bleed into all aspects of life and lay a thick foundation for my values and beliefs. Rethorst's choreographic thinking method is built on

improvisational principles of elasticity and spontaneity through embodied experience.

Democracy requires the responsiveness and attention of improvisation. On a much smaller scale, in my process, I utilized group improvisational practices to cultivate connections between individuals through exploration in this way, requiring a responsive body grounded in their own sense of self.

In an attempt to gauge the success of my democratic experiment, I asked the dancers to complete a questionnaire after the performances. Abby Carlozzo wrote of what elements I emphasized in process: “At times we sensed one another and at times we were driven by an internal beat or a reaction to the “worlds” around us. Additionally, both intra- and inter-personal relationships were emphasized throughout as we wrestled with our individual characters and navigated our self-made worlds and those of others.” This navigation of the self with others through the frame of individual worlds and characters was experienced by the dancers on this microcosmic level. Lily Kane further supports this: “The process made me very aware of how to be a strong individual within a group of other strong individuals. How could I fully commit to my specific character, while still fitting in and being a part of the larger group of other very specific characters? “ American’s highly value individuality. The notion that we can maintain a strong sense of self amongst others lies at the heart of democracy. Direct democracy connotes that a chorus of singular voices can join to implement productive change for the entire nation. The cast of American women I assembled embody this structure because we are products of our nation and history. We continually invested in exploring and showing connections between the self and the group on a micro level, but more broadly we modeled a democratic ideal of how to be together.

Endeavoring to make a dance through the creating of the dance has uncovered the assumptions and values that made up how I choreographed *Wreckage*. Reflection on the process has clarified the importance of choreographic thinking, democracy, and improvisation to me as a maker and human being. Dance has a unique ability to utilize all of these three modalities in one art form. For *Wreckage*, these ideas were just below the surface, not cognizant in the making, but as Rethorst asserts, “what lies under my conscious decisions is leading the decisions” (67). To trust the process like this, to be available, open, attentive, and inquisitive, is exhilarating and informative. Directing an experience like this and understanding these underlying beliefs and values that I hold has not necessarily broken new ground for me or anyone else. It more so exposed what was already there, or more simply “the process is more of uncovering than adding or imposing” (Rethorst 120). How will this new cognition of my affinities influence how I make work in the future? I am curious to discover this as my journey progresses and continue to uncover dances.

Works Cited

- Bogart, Anne. *And Then, You Act: Making Art in an Unpredictable World*. New York: Routledge, 2007. Print.
- Dewey, John. "Creative Democracy: The Task Before Us." 1939. Beloit College. Web. 11 Apr. 2015. <http://pages.uoregon.edu/koopman/courses_readings/dewey/dewey_creative_democracy.pdf>.
- Dewey, John. *Art as Experience*. New York: Minton, Balch & Company, 1934. Print.
- Feck, Candace. "Of Politics, Performance and the Seeping Nature of Democratic Values." The American Democracy Project. SUNY Brockport, Brockport. 27 Feb. 2013. Lecture.
- Novack, Cynthia J. *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture*. Madison, Wis: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990. Print.
- Rethorst, Susan. *A Choreographic Mind: Autobodygraphical Writings*. Helsinki: Theatre Academy Helsinki, 2012. Print.